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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore first grade students' conceptions of reading and writing, and how those conceptions may be associated with and influenced by the type of reading instruction they receive. The study was conducted in three separate classrooms, each based upon theoretically different models of literacy learning: (1) a content-centered mastery learning program; (2) a traditional, eclectic, basal reading approach; and (3) a child-centered literature approach. All children were interviewed individually concerning their conceptions of reading and writing. Children's reading achievement levels were also obtained from the teachers. Responses were rated according to the degree to which they were meaning-based or related to the deep structure aspects of language as opposed to the degree to which the responses were letter-sound based or related to surface structure. The results reflected the nature of the classrooms and the children's ability levels. Students' conceptions of reading and writing were highest or most meaning-based in the informal or literature-based classroom. The traditional or basal class students had the middle-level mean score, while mastery learning students had the lowest or most analytical score. When correlated with achievement level, the middle achievers had the lowest reading conception scores and the highest writing conception scores. Both reading and writing achievement scores for the informal classroom tended to decline from low achievers to high achievers. Results suggest that the type of instruction and the context for instruction significantly and quite powerfully affect the way that first grade children perceive literacy and literacy activities, and that this effect changes with the students' achievement level. (HTH)

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Learning within a Classroom Context: First Graders' Conceptions of Literacy

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The study reported on here is concerned with children's own conceptions or ideas about literacy. That is, the study is an investigation of children's personal understandings of the nature of reading and writing. Although studies concerning this topic have been conducted in the past, they have been relatively few in number and have been more concerned with a descriptive and developmental analysis of children's conceptions (i.e. the conceptions children do hold and the directions in which they change through schooling). Little work has been done concerning the causal aspects of children's conceptions of literacy.

Such a dearth of knowledge in this regard is unfortunate. It seems very likely, indeed, that the way one perceives reading and writing as a child will affect later behavior when that behavior is freed from the constraints and coercions of school-related tasks.

The current state of adult literacy behavior is not very encouraging. Ley (1979), for example, reports that 10% of the adult American population reads 80% of the books and half of the adult population has not read a book cover to cover. Thus the question can be raised: do the adults who tend and choose not to be involved in literacy-related activities see reading and writing as a meaningless chore having little practical or personal value? Moreover, if such is a likely possibility, a second question to be considered concerns the wellspring for such negative views. Precisely, do the negative views toward literacy in adulthood emerge from negative conceptions of reading and writing as a child? If this is within the realm of possibility one may further question the sources of children's conceptions of reading and writing. This is the focus of the present study.

Specifically, the study attempts to understand first-graders' conceptions of reading and writing and how those conceptions may be associated with and influenced by the type of reading instruction provided

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these children.

It is now fairly obvious that there are different kinds of instructional paradigms available for teaching reading. Research (DeFord, in press) has demonstrated that the teacher's theoretical orientation toward reading is reflected in the kind of instruction provided. Moreover, the work of Mosenthal (1983) suggests that the schemata a teacher maintains for literacy learning can have a direct influence on her students. Thus, it is not unreasonable to posit that the type of instruction that is provided for children affects not only their intellectual growth in reading and writing, but also their internalized notions of what constitutes reading and writing and their affective orientation towards the same.

Therefore, the importance of research into children's views of reading and writing should not be discounted. The significance stems from the likelihood of the effects of those early views on adult literate behavior, and from the possibility that such views may themselves be dependent upon the type of instruction that is provided.

Related Research

Research efforts in children's conceptions of reading, while not intense, have been on-going for several years. One early review of research (Denny and Weintraub, 1963) reported that a favorable attitude toward reading is necessary prior to entry into first grade. The nature of that positive attitude, however, whether cognitive or affective, was not identified. Another study mentioned in that review reported a great deal of variability in kindergartener's definitions of reading. It also reported that no correlations were found between reading achievement levels of fifth-graders or approaches to reading instruction (i.e. phonics versus basal programs),

and the students' own conceptions of reading. This early work showed that an interest existed in this area but that the work was not fully explicated. What, for example, is the difference between a phonics ad a basal program? What exactly constitutes that favorable attitude for reading? Is it an enjoyment of reading itself, an enjoyment of story or information acquisition, or possibly a realization of the importance of reading for life's later work?

Weintraub and Denny's (1965) own study in this field asked first-grade children in the first week of school to answer the question "What is reading?". They then categorized the responses into one of seven categories. Their major finding was that children come to school with widely varied conceptions of what constitutes reading, and that a large number of students (27%) were not able to intelligibly answer the question.

Johns (1972) asked fourth-graders to define reading. The responses obtained were placed into one of five categories scaled in terms of sophistication of response. These were: "No Response", response related to "Classroom Procedures", "Word Recognition Response", Meaningful Response", and "Meaningful and Word Recognition Response". Johns found significant correlations greater than .3 between reading achievement levels and the level of sophistication in the students' definitions of reading.

A second study by Johns (1974) used the same data collection paradigm with fourth-grade students of high an low achievement levels. He found that, although both groups gave responses that fell into the non-meaningful category, the high achievers or good readers gave significantly more responses that were classified as meaningful. The findings of the Johns' studies suggest, at least tentatively, that good readers seem to be associated with higher, more meaningful conceptions of reading than poor

readers.

The Johns' studies directly asked children to define reading in an interview-like format. A more recent study (Bondy, 1985) included a four-month long observational investigation of a first-grade classroom using the basal reading approach. Based on the researcher's observations children of various achievement levels were classified into definitional categories of reading. The researcher found that low readers exhibited definitions of a more surface-level awareness of reading while high readers displayed deeper, more meaningful concepts of reading.

The available research, then, appears to implicate the following tentative conclusions about children's conceptions of reading:

1. Children, as young as first-graders, do maintain internalized ideas concerning reading and can, in general, either express those ideas coherently when queried or demonstrate those ideas through their activities within a classroom context.

2. Good readers tend to define reading as something concerned with meaning and the apprehension of meaning. Poor readers, on the other hand, tend to see reading as a process of converting symbol to sound. Their expressed conceptions of reading do not tend to embrace the meaningfulness of the process.

Intensive research into the writing process of children and adults has been apparent only in the past decade. Correspondingly, studies concerning children's conceptions of writing have yet to appear.

The purpose of the study reported here attempted to extend the line of research into children's conceptions of reading by investigating first-graders' conceptions of reading in terms of their reading achievement levels and the type of literacy instruction that they received. Moreover,

the study attempted to describe children's early conceptions of writing as constrained by achievement level and type of instruction.

The Classrooms

The study was conducted in three separate first-grade classrooms, each based upon theoretically different models of literacy learning. All teachers were identified as highly competent and motivated professionals within the instructional approach used. The classrooms could be characterized in the following manner: (1) a content-centered mastery learning program; (2) a traditional, eclectic, basal reading approach; and (3) a child-centered literature based approach.

Literacy instruction in the mastery learning room followed a very routinized format. Reading groups met with the teacher in the morning. Instruction began with a review of previously learned words. The children, in unison, read each previously learned word three times each while pointing to the words on the class chart with their index fingers. As the year progressed this initial exercise required increasing amounts of time as the number of words to be reviewed increased. Following this exercise the teacher presented the new words for the day. Focusing on a particular sound or segment of a target word she led them through a sequence of "say the word, spell the word, sound the word, say the word, write the word, proof the word". Next she presented sentence strips which contained the target word in context. The groups read the sentences chorally and were then asked to come up with sentences of their own. This done, the teacher would present the next word employing the same routine. After going through all the words for the day and assigning several workbook pages from the Sullivan Programmed Reading Series (1973) the group was dismissed to their regular seats.

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Students were evaluated during a specific test time that occurred in the early afternoon. In the criterion-referenced tests individual students were required to orally read a list of vocabulary words without error. When such a test was passed a new list of words was assigned to the students.

Reading instruction in the traditional and eclectic basal reading classroom was somewhat less routinized than the mastery learning room. Reading groups in this room began with a brief look at the workbook pages to be completed by the students at their desks. Individual groups then took turns coming to the "reading corner" for instruction. Moving around the group in round-robin style, each child read approximately one paragraph from their books. Later the teacher would call on individual students in the group to answer questions over what they had read, or to provide answers for workbook exercises that had been either earlier assigned or were being covered during the lesson. Not infrequently the teacher set a literature book as the focus of a reading lesson with in-depth discussions about characters, settings, events, and unusual vocabulary. Instruction was tied to the basal curriculum in that all children proceeded through the same set of tasks, moderated only by the speed with which their own group moved. The tasks in general came from the basal text or workbook and were guided in her presentation by the teacher's edition of the basal.

The evaluation of reading in this classroom tended to follow traditional lines. A large portion of the evaluation came from informal observations of the students' oral reading. This was supplemented evaluations of their seatwork and the periodic tests that were part of the basal reading program.

In the literature-based classroom reading instruction was not an isolated curricular component, but was integrated into the other areas of the

curriculum. Classroom activities centered around themes and the teacher inundated the room with books that reflected the particular theme. The children were free to select books of their own choosing from the class library. They were also free within limits to choose what they would like to do with the books. For example, they could read the book silently, to the teacher or aide, or to friends in the corner of the room. The children could have the book read to them by a fifth-grade "helper" or a parent aide. They could compose and construct a book of their own, modeled after the trade book that they had chosen. Or they could choose to represent the story in a form other than language, such as painting or sculpting. These representational products would be available to the class for inspection and discussion. The teacher wandered through the class having individuals or groups read to her. She also conducted reading mini-lessons with individuals or groups using the literature book of the child as the textbook and source for examples. The teacher, in addition, modeled reading for the children by reading to them several times each day and engaging them in relatively sophisticated discussion about the books. She adapted the use of "Big books" and the Shared-Book experience (Holdaway, 1979) for her classroom and used it often. Language experience events and stories were also incorporated into the room. Reading was taught in song, poem, story, and informational material.

Evaluation in this room was relatively informal and, indeed, went unnoticed by most children. The teacher carried a checklist of reading "skills" for each child with her during the morning hours. As the students read for her during these one-on-one sessions she was able to mark the checklist based upon her first-hand observations. These informal observations also directed the teacher in forming the temporary small groups that required instruction in particular skill and strategy areas. The

teacher also kept examples of children's writing throughout the year. This, in particular, demonstrated the students' growth in and control over the written language.

Method

Data collection occurred during the month of May to insure that the school experience had an opportunity to impact on the students' ideas of reading and writing. All first-grade children in the three classrooms were individually interviewed concerning their personal conceptions of reading and writing. Each child was asked to go with one of the researchers to either a corner of the classroom of into the hall. Once away from the class they were simply asked the questions, "What is reading?" and "What is writing?". Often, as noted in previous studies, this prompt failed to generate a response from the child. When this occurred the initial inquiries were followed-up with the cues, "What happens when you read?", "What do you do when you read?", "How do you read?", and/or "What do you think reading is?". The same question forms were also used for inquiries concerning writing . When the child did provide an answer to the question a prompt of "What else" followed in order to insure that each child told everything he or she wished concerning his or her definitions of reading and writing.

Each response was transcribed by the researcher at hand. The children were told that there were no correct or incorrect answers and that the recording of their answers was solely for the purposes of the researchers' own project. It should be pointed out that the researchers had been visiting each classroom regularly throughout the school year. Thus, when the data was collected in May the children were very familiar with the research team and did not seem to be threatened or anxious by their presence.

The answers that the children provided ranged from the terse to the elaborate. For example, in response to the reading question one child said, "Kind of fun. Sometimes I make mistakes on words". Another child told the researcher, "You learn new words sometimes. Read a whole bunch of new words". Among the more elaborated responses produced were the following: "It's sort of hard and sort of easy. When I get stuck I ask my friends and if they don't know I put the book away and find another one. Sometimes if I read a whole book I ask the teacher if I can read it to the whole class. If you want to read a book to the class or the teacher and you can't keep on practicing". Another first-grader said: "I don't think this is an easy question. I think its fun. I read in my bedroom and where its quiet. If its a very long one I start to sweat because my eyes begin to steam and hurt. One thing I like about reading - when there's nothing to do, it's the only thing to do". Finally, one other response had a child recalling her earlier school years. She told one researcher, "You learn how to read. That you can read books to other people. Sometimes its sad that some people in our class can read and others cannot. Reading is a lot to learn - it's hard work. There's hard words in some books, but you have to sound them out. When you're in kindergarten and preschool you just make up words". All responses, save one, were able to be evaluated according to the evaluation scale regardless of their complexity.

In addition to the response data information regarding the children's reading achievement levels was also obtained. This was done by querying the teachers, who had at least one year's experience of observing each child in her class, to rate each child by her perceptions of level of achievement.

Scoring

The children's responses were transcribed and randomly ordered across schools and achievement levels. Trained doctoral students in reading education were then asked to rate each response according to the degree to which the response was meaning based or related to the deep structure aspects of language as opposed to the degree to which the response was letter-sound based or related to surface structure. Responses were scored on a 1 to 7 scale with 1 reflecting a surface-level, analytic response and 7 reflecting a deep-level, holistic, meaning-based response. An example of a reading response rated high in meaningfulness (assigned a score of 7) is:

> "It is like when you can understand things. Reading, when you read it is fun. Like if you want to know something about the United States you can look in a book to find out".

Conversely typical analytic responses looked like:

> "Letters put together that make words".
> "It's something like you know what the letters say, you can read them".

Results

The results were quite reflective, in general, of the nature of the classrooms and the ability level of the children.

First, consider the results in terms of the various classroom types. In examining the mean scores of the students' conceptions of both reading and writing the informal or literature-based classroom had the highest or most meaning-based conceptions of reading and writing (see Figures 1 & 2). The traditional or basal room had the middle-level mean score while the mastery learning room had the lowest or most analytical scores.

Such scores are entirely consistent with the mode of instruction and classroom contexts for learning provided for these children. As noted

earlier, the informal room stressed the apprehension of meaning through interacting with whole texts (e.g., books). The mastery learning room placed its emphasis on the surface-level aspects of reading and writing. Correct spelling, establishing letter-sound relationships, learning prefixes and suffixes, saying words in isolation, etc. were given the greatest attention. The traditional room had a mixed or eclectic instructional emphasis. Although there was some work at the level of stories and books, a large amount of instructional time was devoted to learning letters and sounds etc.

When looking at the main effects for means by achievement level the matter becomes somewhat more problematic. In the children's conceptions of reading it becomes apparent that the middle achievers had the lowest scores, while in writing that same group had the highest scores (see Figures 1 and 2). Further, in writing and especially reading, the low group consistently had higher scores than the high achievers. Such findings run counter to earlier studies which showed the high achievers tended to have greater meaning-based conceptions of reading. Note, however, that the difference between groups differentiated by achievement is slight and statistically non-significant, when compared to groups differentiated by classroom orientation.

In examining the results from a third perspective, that is the interaction of achievement levels by classroom orientation the picture becomes clearer (see Figures 3 and 4). In both reading and writing the scores for the informal classroom tended to decline from low achievers to high achievers. On the other hand, the scores for the mastery learning room (with the exception of the mid-level mastery learning reading group) and the traditional room increase from low to high achievers. The basic trend then is for scores of the informal children to decline as achievement increases

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while the scores for the traditional and basal rooms to move in the opposite direction. Finally, note that regardless of direction the traditional and informal rooms have consistently higher scores than the mastery learning room.

Interpretations and Discussion

Possibly the major interpretation to be made from this analysis is that the type of instruction and the context for instruction significantly and quite powerfully affect the way that first grade children perceive literacy and literacy activities. And, this effect is not static, but dynamic, changing by achievement level of the students within those classes.

Consider the informal or literature-based classroom. Although the average conception of reading and writing scores for the entire class is high, the scores tend to fall as achievement rises. This may be due to the nature of the instruction provided these children. In the informal, literature-based, whole language room early instruction is centered on whole stories, books read aloud to children, children writing their own books, first as picture books and later adding text, using their own invented spellings. Their concern at this early point is conveying the meaning of the story. As the children progress in this room they subsequently move into more and more decontextualized literacy events. That is, they begin to look at individual words and letters as objects of interest in themselves. Although concern for meaning is still apparent an strong, this exploration of decontextualized print begins to surface. Such a developmental trend is similar to that found by Biemiller (1971) in his study of oral reading errors of first-graders. In this study, context was initially dominant followed by a shift in emphasis to letters and sounds and later an integration of the

two.

It would seem quite logical to expect the high achievement students to move into this decontextualized environment before the middle and low achievers, and that the middle-level achievers to make this move before the low achievers. As was observed even in May in the informal classroom there were a few children who were only then making early steps into this new world of literacy.

The picture for the other two classrooms are reversals of the one just presented. As the achievement level for students in the mastery and traditional rooms increased the scores for their conceptions of reading and writing also increased. This, also, can be explained in terms of the instructional processes provided to the students. In both classrooms the initial instruction was very definitely centered on letters sounds and words. Phonics instruction was emphasized as was word perfect reading. The traditional room, however, augmented this paradigm by including story reading sessions and some work with whole books. This may explain the consistently higher scores for the traditional room over the mastery learning class despite the similarity of their curves.

Nevertheless, in both classrooms the nature of the instruction in reading and writing progress in a "recontextualized" direction. After beginning with letters and sounds, and then moving to words, both classes slowly progressed to whole texts - either writing whole stories or texts, or reading texts that approximated stories. And again, it is likely that the high achievers would be the first to move into this recontextualized environment, followed next by the mid level achievers. Thus as the classes progressed through the year and the students became more and more differentiated in achievement and instruction their conceptions also became

more differentiated by the nature and direction of the instruction provided.

Another important aspect of the study is seen in terms of whole classroom scores. Regardless of the direction of the score lines, the informal and the traditional rooms had decidedly higher scores in their conceptions of both reading and writing. And, the informal room had slightly higher means than the traditional room. This suggests that despite changes of instructional emphasis and direction the informal class maintained a holistic orientation while the mastery learning class maintained an analytical perspective. This effect is over and beyond the nature and direction of their instructional process - either one of decontextualization or recontextualization.

It also should be pointed out that this holistic-analytic or decontextualization-recontextualization duality extended beyond informal instruction. It was pervasive within the entire classroom context, curriculum, and social dynamics found in the room. For example, in the mastery learning room the children not only learned letters, sounds, and words in isolation, they learned these things in personal isolation from one another as well. Talking among the children was discouraged and each day the children set their cardboard folders up in front of themselves to create a carrel effect so that they could practice their words without distracting or being distracted by others.

Contrast this to the informal room where children actively collaborated with one another in co-authoring books, setting up teacher-student scenarios in which one student read to or taught something to other class members. There were many times during the day when children were encouraged to share stories, ideas, or experiences with one another.

These differences were indeed striking. Perhaps even more striking was

the fact that the isolation in the mastery learning room and the collaboration seen in the informal room were directly encouraged and apparent throughout the year.

The fact that the conceptions of reading and writing scores when looked at from achievement levels do not agree with earlier studies is problematic. However, if it can be assumed that the earlier reported studies dealt with children's from mainline classrooms (i.e., traditional, basal-oriented rooms) the problem is less troublesome. For the results from the traditional basal room in the present study correspond nicely to those of earlier studies. That is, the low achievers had a more analytic perspective of literacy, and as achievement level increased the children's perspective became more holistic or meaning and text oriented. However, although the finding concurs with earlier studies, the reason suggested for such a finding is not the same. The present study would suggest that such a finding is more an artifact of instructional processes provided to readers of different achievement levels than it is an artifact of the achievement levels themselves. Such an interpretation is tentative but hopefully will be more fully explored in future studies.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from the present study are at best tentative. Other factors such as the effects of home environment or general intelligence may be playing a role in the students' development of literacy conceptions.

Aware of such limitations to the study some things are still worthy of mention and debate. First, the study suggests, that the conceptions of reading and writing that children hold are markedly affected by the type of reading and writing instruction they are engaged in and by the general

contextual framework of the classroom. Moreover, this relationship is a dynamic and changing one. That is, the type of instruction and context may set the general framework for children's notions about reading and writing, but within that general frame the direction of the instructional processes also plays a role - whole to part or part to whole.

The second major conclusion is related to the first. It is a more specific explication of the first. That is, classrooms that emphasize the analytical or segmental nature of language such as the mastery learning rooms in this study, tend to evoke responses from children that are analytical and surface level. Classrooms that are oriented to a holistic meaning-based study of written language, such as the informal, literature-based room in the present study evoke responses that tend to be, in general, more holistic or meaning based.

An instructional trend that moves from analytic to holistic will tend to result in more holistic responses as the instruction progresses. Instruction that proceeds in the opposite direction will tend to yield responses that become progressively more analytical. What significance does this study hold for schooling? First, teachers should be aware that the type of instruction they provide students not only affects the observable performance aspects of instruction but also may profoundly affect children's internalized definitions and conceptions of the processes they are learning. If teachers feel that a certain internal orientation to literacy is important then a particular kind of instruction and context for instruction may be implicated. Extending this notion, it may be that adults holding certain kinds of conceptions about reading and writing may display different kinds of reading and writing behaviors. It is only conjecture at this point, but it may be the case that adults and adolescents who see reading as a non-meaningful,

mechanical activity may be the non-readers and reluctant readers that are found in society. If such is the case then the possible implications of the study are enormous. Certain kinds of instruction may be implicated over other types of instruction based upon the tacit notions of reading and writing that they convey to students and not simply because of the short-term test scores that may result.

What is needed in future studies? The traditional calls for replications with larger samples over longer periods of time and across different grade levels to see if these trends hold are all appropriate. Additionally, such questions worthy of further study include: What should a desirable or optimal orientation or concept of reading and writing actually look like, and how might such orientations be observed? Are the orientations visible in the preschool years?, Do they change as children change schools or teachers?, What kinds of orientations do adult readers and non-readers hold? Is the differential between informal and mastery learning instruction in meaning-based conceptions maintained in later school years, or does the developmental trend allow the children in the mastery learning instruction to eventually develop more meaning-based definitions than children in informal-based instruction?

In conclusion, the major recommendation emanating from this study is for teachers to become more sensitive to the types of things they do with their children. Teachers should understand that the type and context of instruction they provide children can affect some deep seated notions they maintain about the nature of their schoolwork.

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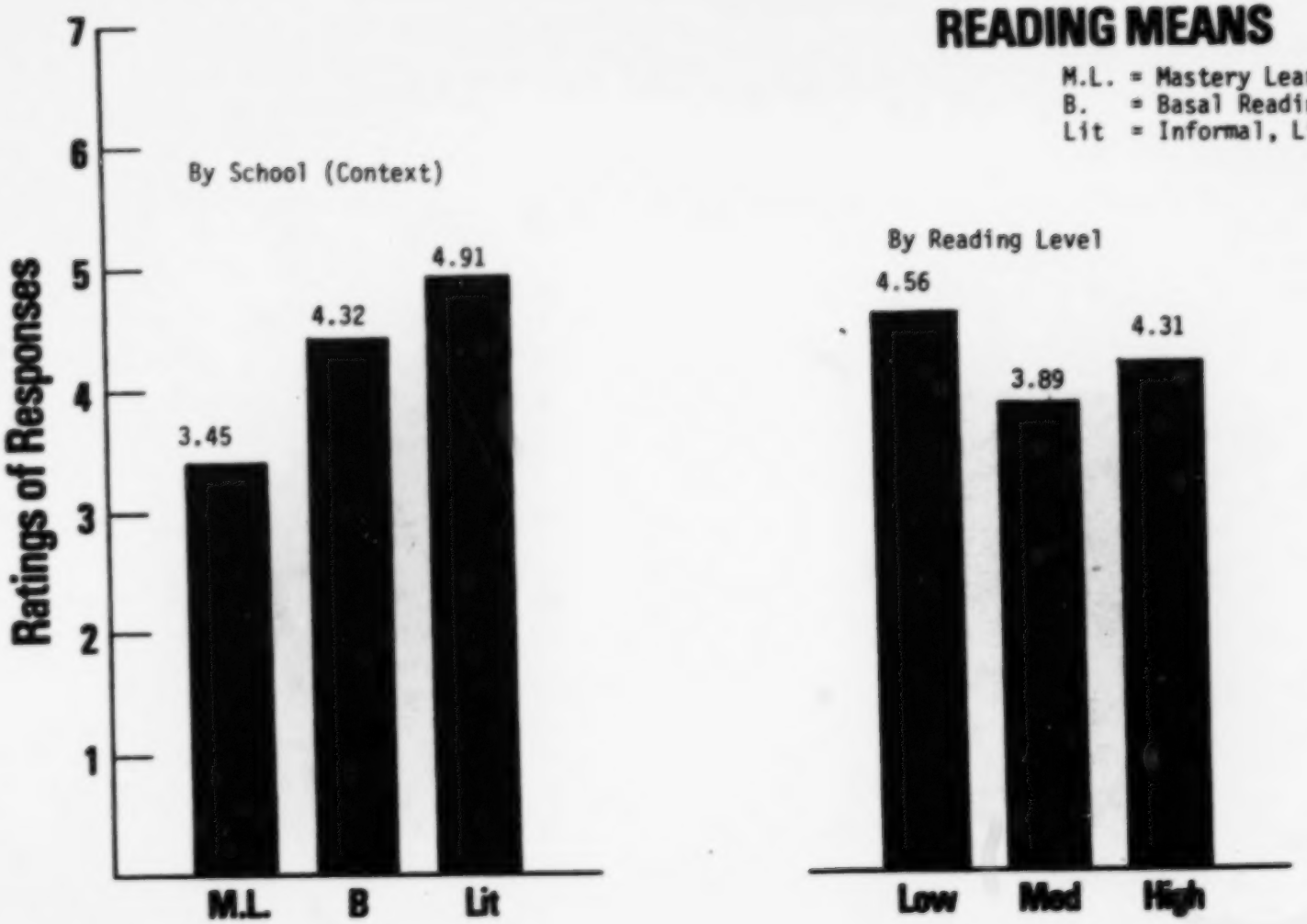
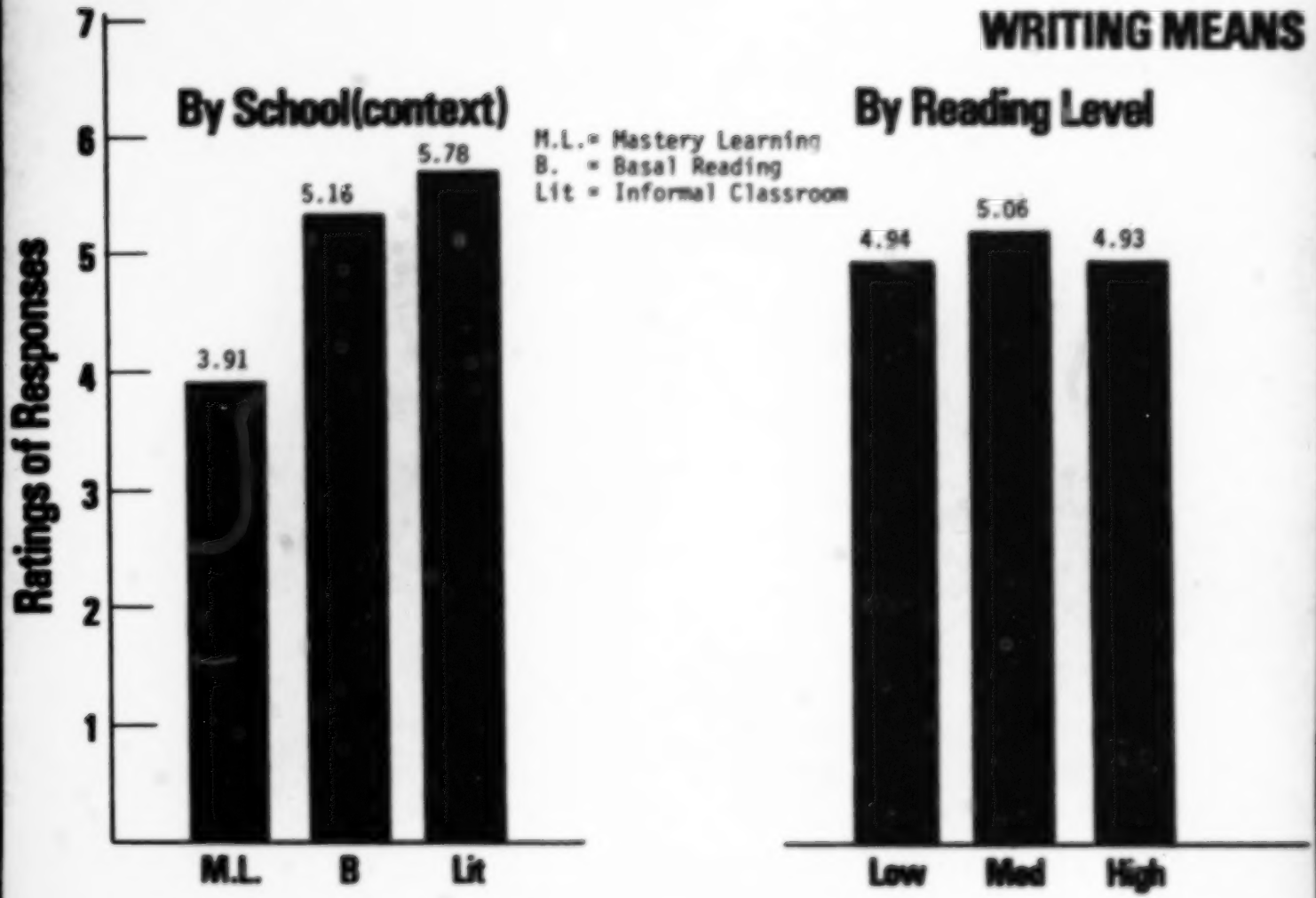

READING MEANS
M.L. = Mastery Learning Room
B. = Basal Reading Room
Lit = Informal, Literature Room
By School (Context)
Ratings of Responses
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
3.45
4.32
4.91
M.L.
B
Lit
By Reading Level
4.56
3.89
4.31
Low
Mod
High

Figure 1


WRITING MEANS
By School(context)
By Reading Level
M.L.= Mastery Learning
B. = Basal Reading
Lit = Informal Classroom
Ratings of Responses
7
6
5
4
3
2
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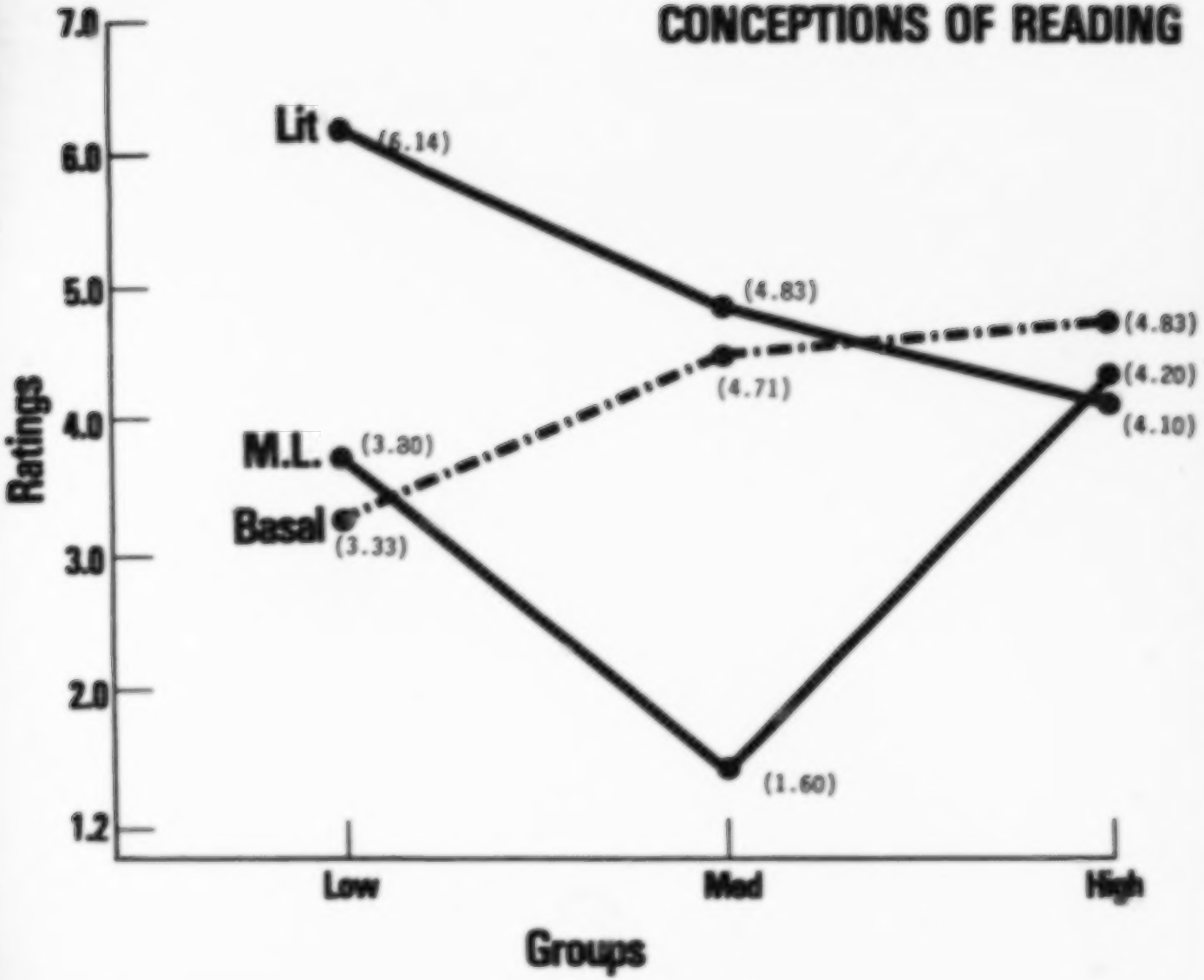
5.06
4.93
M.L.
B
Lit
Low
Med
High

Figure 2


CONCEPTIONS OF READING
7.0
6.0
5.0
4.0
3.0
2.0
1.2
Ratings
Lit
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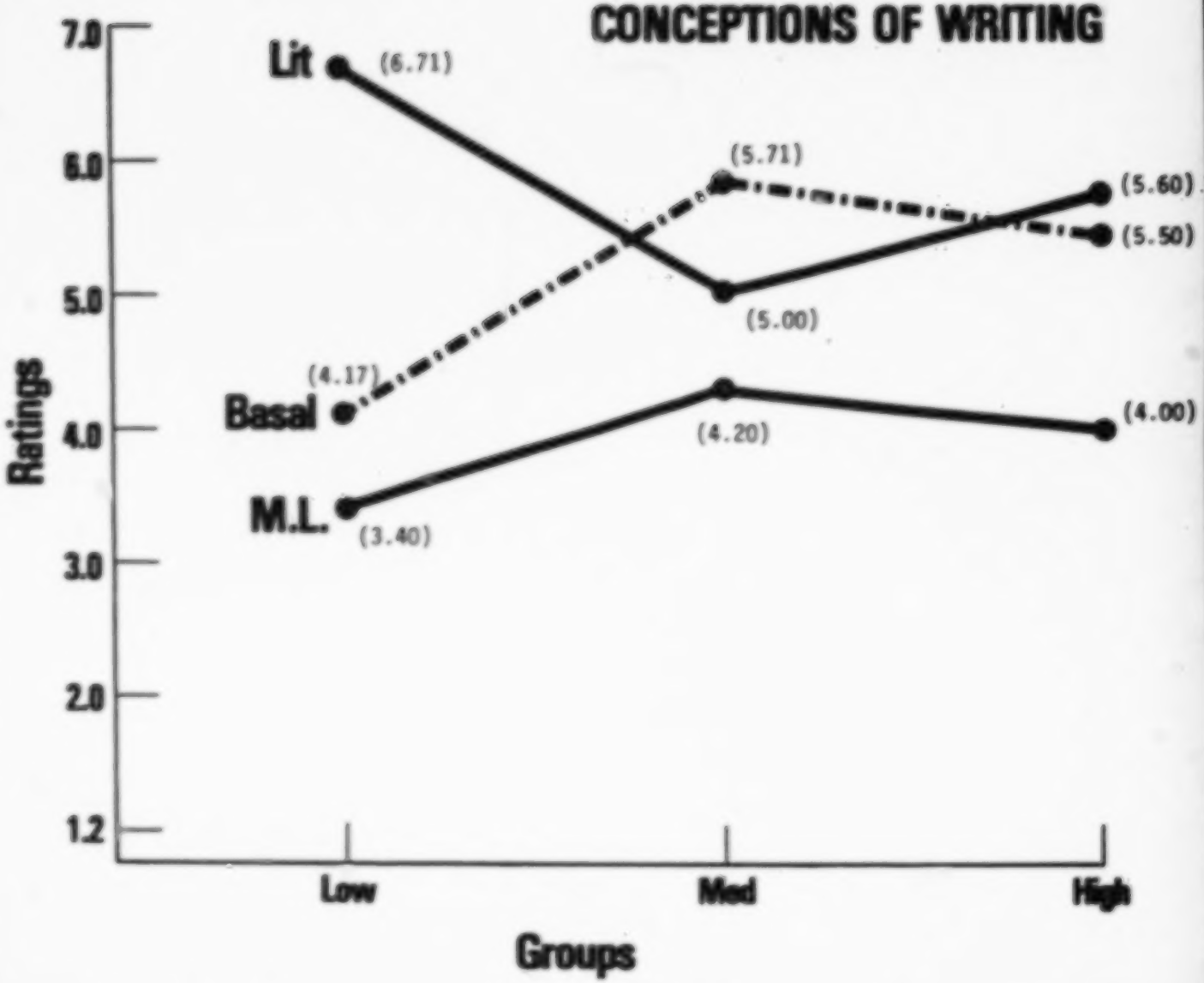
(4.83)
(4.71)
(4.20)
(4.10)
M.L.
(3.80)
Basal
(3.33)
(1.60)
Low
Mod
High
Groups

Figure 3


CONCEPTIONS OF WRITING
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2.0
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Ratings
Lit
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(5.50)
(5.00)
(4.17)
Basal
(4.00)
(4.20)
M.L.
(3.40)
Low
Med
High
Groups

Figure 4